

Study Skills: Building the study skills needed for 13+ and beyond

Teaching resource 2: Get the best from your memory

Learning objective

The aim of this activity is to introduce pupils to how their memories work.

Information

There has been a great deal of research done on memory which, when applied to learning, can vastly improve our retention and recall of what we learn.

Hermann Ebbinghaus is best known for his discovery of the curve of forgetting, which can be explained to pupils as the **memory slide**. The memory slide shows how fast we forget information. The sharpest decline is in the first 20 minutes, followed by a slightly slower decline by the end of the first hour. After 24 hours the curve flattens out. Systematic reviewing can help to minimise this decline, which is why it is so beneficial to learning.

Ebbinghaus also carried out tests to establish how the position of an item in a list affects how well we recall it. This is known as the primacy and recency effect. We remember best what we learn at the beginning and end of a learning session. This can be explained to pupils as the **memory dip**. The memory dip means that it is a good idea to create several beginnings and endings in your lessons by introducing regular short breaks.

George Miller carried out research using nonsense syllables which showed that a young adult can retain in their working memory an average of seven unconnected facts, plus or minus two.

Certain types of learning in class involve unconnected facts, such as learning:

- a list of words (as on the *Word list* below)
- spellings
- foreign language vocabulary
- the meanings of formulae.

This is another reason why it is important to break learning into manageable chunks with plenty of opportunities for reviewing.

See Chapter 1.3 of *Study Skills: Building the study skills needed for 13+ and beyond* (ISBN 9781471868870) for more about memory.

Equipment

For each pupil:

- a copy of the *Word list* (see below)
- a copy of the *Worksheet* (see below)
- a highlighter pen
- a pen/pencil
- one index card

Preparation

Photocopy the *Word list* and the *Worksheet*. You can create your own word list, if you prefer, as long as it contains four names, a long word at the end and five repeated words.

Instructions

- Give each pupil a copy of the *Worksheet* and the *Word list*. The *Word list* must be face down so no one has an opportunity to start looking at the list of words until you are ready.
- Explain that you are going to read a list of words and that as you do so you want them to follow the list with a finger (kinaesthetic) and mouth the words silently (auditory) as they look at them (visual). When you reach the last word, they should highlight it (visual and kinaesthetic).
- Ask pupils to turn their *Word list* over. Read each word to them once only at a steady pace.
- When you have finished reading the list, ask pupils to turn their *Word list* face down again so they cannot see it. Now ask them to write down all the words they can remember from the list on the top half of their *Worksheet*. Tell them that the order does not matter and repeated words should only be written down once.
- Ask pupils to check the list they have written against the *Word list*. They should make sure they have not written words that were not on the list – this sometimes happens.
- Ask pupils to fill in the answers on the second half of the *Worksheet*.
- Ask for feedback with a show of hands: whose best score was for the first five; last five; repeated and unusual? They can put their hand up more than once if they have two top scores.
- Link the response for the first and last five words with the primacy and recency effect. If we take short breaks, then we create lots of beginnings and ends to our learning.
- Link the response for repeated words with the importance of reviewing their learning – the ‘little and often’ approach.
- Link the response for unusual words to making their learning unusual by using strategies such as memory tricks and mind maps.
- Explain how many separate facts the memory can recall: seven (plus or minus two) for a young adult. Point out that some people just have more ‘Velcro’ in their heads for remembering than others. Reinforce that all pupils, especially those with a lower score, will benefit from the strategies they are learning.
- Take a short break and then review what they have learnt. For example, ask pupils to walk (calmly!) round the classroom and shake hands with three different people. Then they should sit down and, on the index card you have provided, copy the text shown on the following page. They should then write down the three most interesting things they have learnt about memory (kinaesthetic and visual); discuss their answers with their neighbours (auditory) and add another point. Use this review method to get pupils into the habit of writing questions on the front of the card and answers on the back.

Name _____

Form _____

Memory

What three interesting facts have you learnt about memory?

1

2

3

Anything else?

1

3

2

4

See Chapter 4.3 of *Study Skills: Building the study skills needed for 13+ and beyond* for more about index cards.

Useful references

.....
Your Memory: A User's Guide by Alan D. Baddeley (2004) Carlton Books

Use Your Memory by Tony Buzan (2003) BBC Active

www.kidsmemory.com

Word list

hope

tree

move

Justin Bieber

now

field

that

of

left

and

to

of

David Beckham

that

of

and

slowly

Simpsons

and

that

they

actual

that

they

actual

that

they

actual

that

of

Adele

repeat

same

other

inspiration

Worksheet

How many words from the list can you remember? Write them down below.

Only write repeated words once

How many of the following groups of words did you remember?

The first five _____

The last five _____

Repeated words _____

Unusual words _____